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Statement by David Gray Wright  
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Before the House Committee of Government Reform  
Criminal Justice, Drug Policy and Human Resources Subcommittee

Witness Intimidation  
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Chairman Souder, Ranking Member Cummings, Congressman Ruppertsberger, and distinguished Members of the Committee: I am honored to appear before you today.

Witness intimidation has cost my neighborhood dearly. Earlier this year my friend, neighbor, and colleague awoke to flames outside her bedroom window. She was the victim of an attempted firebombing. She was unharmed, but since that time she has been in protective custody. Now she has decided that she can never be safe in Baltimore City. She had lived in the neighborhood for 33 years.

Baltimore and other cities across this country cannot afford to lose good citizens. Baltimore cannot afford to have good families terrorized by malicious gangs. My neighborhood cannot afford to watch as our children become the next generation of thugs. We cannot sit idly as hopelessness, drug addiction, and crime turn neighbors against our justice system.

I am here today to urge you to invest in a solution to this plague. I implore you to invest in the tools necessary to carry out justice when witness intimidation arises. I implore you to invest in protecting brave citizens. I implore you to invest in a criminal justice system that works against miscreants and works for and with the good citizens that I need (and have) as neighbors.

I must also ask you to invest in the tools necessary to prevent this depravity and to restore hope to neighborhoods desperate to succeed. With help we can be healthy, peaceful, neighborly, and proud.

My neighbor worked hard to improve our neighborhood. She swept the streets and alleys tirelessly. She talked with her neighbors. She made demands on the city. She helped to organize community festivals. She talked to the police and she told the police what she saw and heard. She urged them to act against a wave of drug dealers, against a wave of delinquent adolescents, against a neighborhood being invaded. For this her home was attacked.

In the days and hours after this tragedy struck, the system worked. When Molotov cocktails crashed against her house, the police were quick to respond. My neighbor was whisked away and secured. Federal agencies assisted and the resources were there. For this I am thankful. But we must not doubt that the response system must be fortified.

Safety and security for witnesses must never be denied due to a lack of resources. Witnesses must always receive the swift and enduring assistance my neighbor has received. No witness should ever receive anything less. It is costly - yes. But it is a cost we must bear to ensure justice.

We must also bear the cost of reassuring and stabilizing neighborhoods. On the streets of Harwood – our neighborhood - we have seen more police. But they are already starting to dwindle. Though Baltimore suffers from a tremendous strain on its law enforcement, events like this one must bring forth a large, sustained deployment of police.

Seven young men are accused in this crime. Seven young men plotted their own heinous penalty against a woman who stood against their dishonorable code. We must have a police presence that makes clear to those remaining to conspire that this will not be tolerated. Those good citizens facing the fear and distress of acts of witness intimidation must see and take comfort in the presence of protectors.

Therefore, I ask you to fund a strong police presence in areas that are facing systemic witness intimidation. We must demonstrate our unequivocal commitment to combat this behavior. The police must be on the streets. Their presence must be felt by every worried mother and every conniving drug dealer.

In conjunction with this demonstration of the power of law enforcement there must be the presence of hope. We must make clear to our children our commitment to their future. The thugs and criminals of tomorrow are on the corner now. They are aimless and unsupervised. They are vandalizing property to pass the time. Soon, they will be approached by drug dealers to serve as look-outs. These young citizens must receive supervised, structured guidance and have role models to combat those temptations that would lead them astray. They need someone to care.

Already, the foundations exist. The community is concerned and longs to bring activities to these kids. But the local recreation center is destitute, the local after-school programs overwhelmed. Kids show up – but there are too few staff to manage them. There are no supplies, and the facility is battered and deteriorating. There is no excuse for this. Baltimore City is desperately reaching out for public and private partnership to improve these facilities – but we need more help. The rec center needs the resources to carry out its mission – the resources to care and promote hope.

Harwood worries about its young people more than anything else. Funding for a good education, after-school programs, and other opportunities will eliminate the supply of violent criminals of the future. Each person in Harwood knows this. And despite very limited means, good things are still underway. But if we fund inventive, effective programs you will not have to fund protective services for witnesses.

The fuel for so much of this crime and misanthropic behavior is the drug trade. The violent criminals and the drug dealers must be arrested. But their clients must receive treatment. Baltimore and other cities are working desperately to provide treatment but the resources are

scarce. Effective programs should be embraced and reinforced in areas where the drug trade is creating a new justice system based on intimidation. Desperation, hopelessness, and fear cannot reign supreme in our cities.

I urge you to continue to support entities like the Washington-Baltimore High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area and Baltimore Substance Abuse Systems, Inc. Demand that these groups pioneer strong, effective programs. They are making progress.

I am asking, therefore, that as you consider the plague of witness intimidation that you consider the curable causes that cannot be divorced from it. Any allocation of resources to law enforcement should be matched – dollar for dollar – with the community-building, youth-building, drug-treating efforts the community needs.

The solutions to witness intimidation are clear:

- Protect every witness that needs protection
- Provide police and encourage community policing strategies
- Create opportunities for youth development
- Demand tough sentences and high bails
- Facilitate a responsive and transparent justice system
- Ensure every addict has access to treatment

I have already lost a very dear neighbor. I cannot bear to lose the entire neighborhood.

Thank you.